

Learning through a lens

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DOI:

[10.12968/eyed.2019.20.11.25](https://doi.org/10.12968/eyed.2019.20.11.25)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Soni, A & Presswood, S 2019, 'Learning through a lens', *Early Years Educator*, vol. 20, no. 11.
<https://doi.org/10.12968/eyed.2019.20.11.25>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

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Checked for eligibility: 04/04/2019

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<header> Learning through a lens

<standfirst> Reflective practice is core to early years provision, but all too often focuses on righting wrongs. Educational psychologist Anita Soni describes how video can help highlight the positives, and nursery manager Sarah Presswood explains why she finds it so valuable in her setting

Reflective practice is key in early years care and education. It involves critically analysing how you work in order to develop and improve it.¹ The aim is to ensure the individual needs of every child are met, and it is also beneficial for parents who find it reassuring that those who care for their children are constantly striving to raise the standard of the provision. Reflective practice is intended to support staff to become more confident in their abilities, and this in turn causes a rise in morale and job satisfaction.

That's the idea, anyway. But sometimes it can feel very critical; human nature means that all too often people focus on what isn't going well, or an incident that has caused concern. While it is clearly important to shine a light on aspects that require development, it can foster a sense of fire-fighting and negativity. And solely focusing on problems misses the opportunity to give headspace to what is working well. Not only does identifying someone's strengths allow success to be celebrated, it pinpoints practice that can be replicated, extended and shared with others.

This is where Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) now known as Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) with professionals has a place. The model isn't new – it has been around for more than two decades and is now being used more widely in schools and nurseries.² It involves filming a short interaction between a practitioner and a child (or group of children or adult), and then reviewing it using the principles of attuned interaction and guidance to reflect on what makes the communication sensitive, responsive and harmonious.³ Again, intersubjectivity and attuned interaction aren't new concepts, and have been used for a number of years as part of VIG with parents to help parents further develop their relationships and communication with their children.

<subhead> Putting it into practice

The Video Project run at George Perkins Nursery in Birmingham started as a result of wanting to get to grips with why some children – usually the quieter and apparently less willing to engage individuals – seemed to not have a voice while attending sessions. The training kicked off by videoing staff members interacting positively with the children including babies, toddlers and the 3-4 year olds. Then the clips were watched back by the whole team as part of a training session. Everyone was asked to keep the AVIGUK principles in mind and reflect on what attuned interaction looks and feels like, for both the child and practitioner?

Because the video clips showed the staff member and children interacting harmoniously, it was easy to identify positives, which made the experience both constructive and upbeat. In fact, it was such an affirmative thing to do that six staff members immediately volunteered to go next, moving it on to the next stage which involved them identifying an area of practice they wanted to reflect on and develop further, videoing themselves, analysing the footage to pinpoint specific better than usual moments and short segments to share them with their peers as a follow-up exercise.

<subhead> Rolling with it

From small seeds, mighty trees grow, and this has definitely happened at the nursery. Initially sessions were facilitated by Anita as a VIG guider, but now VERP meetings now take place every six weeks, with no need for Anita to guide the process. Sessions run for around an hour, usually at the

end of the day, with about six staff members contributing to the discussion by explaining why they have chosen certain clips and sharing their insights. On a very practical level, this also means that sufficient staff remain on the floor to keep the nursery running smoothly!

Practitioners set their own goals, known as helping questions, which range from supporting a particular child to join in more, to stimulating discussions in supervisions with members of staff, and then choose relevant footage. Usually the clips illustrate excellent and exceptional practice, but this is not done boastfully; rather, it isolates a successful moment meaning that workers can do more of what made it go so well. This doesn't just help in the handling of future tricky situations, but means practice improves across the board.

Everyone looks forward to the sessions, as they provide an opportunity for individuals to share moments of which they are particularly proud with their peers and managers. Everyone discusses why the interaction featured in the clip went better than usual, and how that impacted on how both adult and child felt and thought at the time and in the longer-term. It also provides a forum to focus on details, such as how to help a specific child engage or respond more than they tend to do otherwise, and to deliberate on aspects such as when to wait and when to talk, and the nuances of children's non-verbal cues such as their posture, facial expression and gaze.

<subhead> The wider context

Being a reflective practitioner is a cornerstone of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Although OFSTED no longer requires a self-evaluation form, the organisation expects managers and staff to be able to talk knowledgeably to the inspector about the setting, the quality of care and activities provided, and how well the learning needs of all children are being met.⁴ VERP offers a brilliant tool to do this as, through a process of review and challenge, it facilitates development and improvements of everyday practice.

<case study panel> VERP has made reflective practice a golden thread throughout the nursery, says Sarah Presswood

George Perkins Nursery has always adopted a reflective practice approach, but after Anita's first VERP session, I understood that reflection needed to be intrinsic to everyone's daily practice. However, in order for it to run through the nursery as a golden thread as I wanted, I realised that staff, management and children needed to feel confident and responsive. With this in mind, my assistant manager and I ran a training day for the staff to agree our own principles of what reflective and self-assured staff and children look like. This involved undertaking three activities:

- The first involved defining the three qualities that identify 1) reflective, 2) confident and 3) responsive staff and children. This was completed in groups in order to facilitate debate and negotiation.
- The second exercise required individuals to reflect on their own practice and rate themselves on the three qualities listed above. They were asked to consider the evidence they had for their self-assessment, and describe some next steps to try and improve their scores. The outcomes of this self-evaluation were not shared publicly but were instead followed up in supervision.
- The final activity was along the same lines as the second, but relating to children. Senior and junior members of staff were paired up and asked to consider the three defined qualities of each key child. Again, there was an expectation that reasons would be given for the ratings, and rough action plans formulated to boost scores as needed.

The key principle of VERP – identifying what is good and striving to do more of it in order to move practice forward – was at the heart of this training day. The level of engagement was really high, and team members demonstrated surprising yet pleasing levels of honesty, fuelled by their desire to take their practice and engagement with the children to the next level.

<subhead> Keeping VERP going!

It has been challenging at times to keep the project's momentum even though everyone sees its benefits. We have had to deal with practical issues such as access to cameras and making sure everyone has a chance to share their video with the group in the short review sessions. We use tablets in the rooms for observations, so they were always on hand for the video process and we have come to realise that what is important is to just get some video captured and not try and wait for what the practitioner feels will be the perfect moment. We use students and managers to video situations where the practitioner is engaging with their identified child/children. The practitioner is always in control, can ask for the recording to stop at any time and watch back the video by themselves first to choose whether or not to share it.

The review sessions seem all too brief as the discussion generated by the videos is really engaging. We take turns to share and also allow anyone who has something they are seeking support with to share first. We have come to realise that actually it is the process of self-reflection on the video that is really powerful so even if all videos are not shared then every practitioner feels as though they are gaining from the process.

One of the key things identified through the video sessions has been how crucial it is to give children time to talk and respond. It can be tempting for staff to fill the silence by jumping in, when in fact the child is pondering on what they want to communicate. Giving them time to do this means everyone benefits from these valuable insights. The same is true of staff and students in supervision, and has been a powerful learning point for managers in terms of the value of effective questioning and commenting.

The best outcome of all is witnessing staff putting this into practice. I have seen it in daily interactions, in clips that have been brought to VERP sessions, and when a staff member says: "I have been thinking about how I can support my less confident Key Children and how to give them a voice." For example, one child would not talk at all at the beginning of the EYPP video project, not even to show us what she wanted for breakfast. Since videoing our interactions with her, and reflecting upon how to engage with her, she has become an animated talker, telling us about her fashion choices amongst many other things each day.

<end panel> If you want to get started on using video enhanced reflective practice...

1. At a practical level, you need to find a local VIG guider, cameras or tablets to film on and time. There is a comprehensive list of VIG guiders on the AVIG UK website <https://www.videointeractionguidance.net/>
2. Get the staff motivated and engaged in the project with an inspiring training session
3. Identify a group of staff to start the project and then enjoy reflectively positively on practice together!

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